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Commencement Address at Dordt College, May 2017



by Mark Verbruggen

Graduates of Dordt College 2017, President Hoekstra and members of the Board, most excellent and esteemed faculty, parents and all friends who have gathered here today,

First of all I want to thank you for the honor of being asked to be Commencement speaker. For the past 12 years this institution has been a significant part of my life and ministry in Sioux Center. Students of all kinds—both the wonderful and even the weird—have graced my church and this community with their presence. You have been a big part of my social and intellectual life. Having had the privilege of being adjunct faculty for the

Pastor Verbruggen, formerly adjunct professor of theology at Dordt College and pastor of First Christian Reformed of Sioux Center, Iowa, currently serves as pastor of Living Hope Church (Christian Reformed) in Sarnia, Ontario. He delivered this commencement address in May 2017 at Dordt College.

past 8 years, I have gotten to know many of you well. I know your strengths and weaknesses, your triumphs and failures, what you love (and sometimes who you love!), and what some of you aspire to be. In the dual role of pastor and professor, I have listened to your stories, heard your reports, graded your papers, celebrated your athletic accomplishments, watched your plays, and listened to your concerts. Other times I've affirmed you in your callings, encouraged you when you were down, and even on occasion chastised you to "buck up" and be a person of integrity. Again, thank you for the honor of being able to address you one last time.

Without Dordt College, Sioux Center would not be the place that it is. What is Sioux Center? I like to think of it as the little midwestern town that roared. It roars so loud that I dare say you can go to any part of the world and find someone who knows about this place. This became clear to me a number of years ago while I was walking through the old city of Jerusalem and saw a Dordt College pennant in a trader's stall. It happened again while walking in Honolulu, wearing an Iowa T-shirt, and someone stopped me to ask if I'd ever heard of Dordt College. From one end of the world to the other, this little town has roared, and its roar seems to start from the campus of this college.

But I am not here to extol the institution known as Dordt College. Look around you. Your very presence—the time and resources you have poured into this place—speaks volumes to your dedication to this place. The fact is, the "roar" that echoes around the world from this place does not really originate from the institution called "Dordt." The prophet Amos heard it and proclaimed it many

years ago, and he says it even to us this day: “*The lion has roared; who will not fear? The LORD God has spoken; who can but prophesy?*” (Amos 3:8). The prophet is speaking about the Word of God, and beyond the metaphorical “roar” is the power of the One who has spoken.

We can love our institutions, but let’s never delude ourselves into thinking we are irreplaceable or that somehow the Kingdom of God is dependent upon us. By grace alone we press on with the vision and calling we have received. It’s not you. It’s not Dordt. It is the power of God at work in you. It’s so simple and at the same time so radical and countercultural that it will take more work to live out this Truth than it will for you to have earned your degree.

As your degrees are conferred upon you and you receive a diploma which says as much, remember the words of Philippians 2:13 which say, “*For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” The power is in the Word of God. The Power of One is Jesus Christ. Dordt is not so great. We are not so great. The institution known as “Dordt College” could disappear, but the power of the One who is at work in you and in this world, will press on. Graduates, this same power is in you. How?

To “will” is to think: it’s to dream, imagine, and strive for all that you desire and love. If you are a Christian, it means you think, dream, imagine, and strive for the Kingdom of God—the New Creation that has invaded this world’s time and space through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

To “work” is to engage: it’s to touch, feel, write, create, and make things possible through the gifts and talents that have been given to you. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you will engage, touch, feel, write, create, and make possible that work which bears witness that you belong to a New Creation. You have not sold out to the powers and structures of this world. You work for the Kingdom of God in order to make the love, grace, and truth of Jesus Christ known in a world that desperately needs you to be a person of faith and integrity:

“For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Here’s the reality: If you are to be anything more than the sum total of your student debt or the minuscule value of the paper and ink that make your diploma, remember the Power of One. Remember Jesus Christ and the Kingdom he proclaims. Without this perspective, your post-college life will be structured by identity politics along with the cynicism and the pessimism of the powers of this world. Gordon Spykman once said in a Commencement speech here at Dordt—and he writes it in his book “Reformational Theology”—“Nothing matters but the Kingdom, and because of the Kingdom everything matters.” He says, “The kingship of Christ embraces ‘all authority in heaven and on earth.’ For the restoration of creation and the coming kingdom of God are one and the same.” Geerhardus Vos also adds, “Accordingly Jesus viewed every normal and legitimate province of human life as intended to form part of God’s kingdom.” In the words of Herman Bavinck, “grace restores nature.” Being a Christian is therefore the most “natural” thing in the world. The Christian man and woman is truly human.

Now before I lose you, stay with me for a bit on this. I know that sometimes all this talk about the “Kingdom” and “Structure and Direction” can get a bit clichéd. Why is there such great “sedative power” in our language that attempts to declare the Power of One? Probably because we are not by nature inclined to hear the “roar” of God. We are not naturally inclined to love what God loves and to embrace what God so freely gives. Kingdom living, embracing a New Creation, is radical; and we, by nature, like security and stability: especially when it comes to our theology and worldview.

To maintain stability and security, we make ourselves petty dictators of our own little empires. We surround ourselves with people who look like us, think like us, and act like us. It’s the great sin that plagues us as individuals, institutions, church denominations, and so forth. Within these safe bubbles it’s much easier to launch a preemptive missile of so-called “truth” over the walls of a perceived enemy than it is to remember the Power of One, whose Word destroys our walls and divisions and launches us into the world with a Word of renewal and transformation.

Peter Rollins, in his book *Insurrection* (Simon

& Schuster, 2011), writes about what he calls “The Violence of Resurrection.” He says, “Resurrection [is] a mode of living that embraces the lived experience of doubt, complexity, and unknowing, affirms life, and accepts our responsibility in transforming the world. In this way, Resurrection houses a deep violence, an ethical violence. This is not a violence directed against individuals, but rather a violence against those systems that would oppress, destroy, and bring death” (Rollins 138-139).

It’s always a lot easier to “circle the wagons” and “build the walls high” in order to offer ourselves a false sense of security in a scary world than it is to engage. However, in the Great Commission, Jesus didn’t give us permission to disengage. Jesus sent us out into the world to declare his sovereign reign over everything. Graduates, you are being sent out. This place and this ceremony are not the end but the launching pad for something bigger. So go!

And remember, as you go, that the One seated on the throne of the universe says, “Behold! I make all things new!” He never said, “I make all new things.” To be part of a “kingdom endeavor” is to be part of something that is already here. So take it, grab hold of life and give it the shape of things to come. Work your career, love your spouse, raise a family, look out for the good of your neighbor. For when God is at work in you, God is at work to “will and to act” according to his “good pleasure.” God’s work of restoration takes place in this world, and it

is pleasing and good. It’s the Power of One, and the One is Christ in you.

So again, if you are to be anything more than the sum total of your debt and the minuscule value of your diploma, you will need faith to believe in Something and Someone greater than you. Something is happening to you right now in this place. My favorite Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, said, “Words spoken by authoritative persons in proper contexts have the

power to shape human life.” Words are a means towards life or death. Our words either join with the beautiful chorus of the powerful, radical, countercultural “roar of the Lion” (Amos 3:8) that announces the Power of One, or they are merely part of the cacophony of noise in this world.

Graduates of Dordt College, may the words spoken on this day be meaningful. The words spoken here, the words written on the diploma you will receive, will have the power to shape your life. You may choose to believe it’s all meaningless and that all of this is more noise and verbiage hurled into the wind. However, I hope you don’t. By faith you can believe in something more. You can open yourself up to a bigger world than your life right now. You can let the words of this day—spoken by authoritative persons—shape your life as they call you forward. It will happen in the Power of the One who is at work in you: to Will and to Work for his good pleasure!

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